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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002293

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, AND INR/NESA; NSC FOR E.
MILLARD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Muslim leader Rauf Hakeem's
problems come into tighter focus

Refs: Colombo 2277, and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of
Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: With his party fragmenting around him, Rauf Hakeem of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) finds himself in a very precarious position. While he is respected in Colombo circles for his support of the peace process, Hakeem is considered a lightweight politician. The fact that he is not from the east where a plurality of Sri Lankan Muslims live is also a serious liability. With his political survival at stake, Hakeem has to make a comeback soon or face probable marginalization. Another factor hurting Hakeem is the emerging view that it might not be bad for the peace process if he is cut out of the scene. END SUMMARY.

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Hakeem in a Bind
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2. (C) Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the SLMC, finds himself in a very precarious position. (Note: Hakeem also serves the governing coalition as Minister of Ports and Shipping.) As reported in Reftels, his party has recently fragmented into hostile camps, one remaining loyal to his authority and the other rejecting him out of hand. Both factions appear relatively evenly balanced, although Hakeem seems to be able to rely on the support of a bare majority of the party's 12 MPs and SLMC governing committee members.

3. (C) If the dispute is not settled in some way soon, Hakeem will be tested in coming weeks (and perhaps months) in the court system, as party dissidents continue their effort to remove him as party leader. (Note: The next legal hearing is scheduled for December 13 in Colombo. Party dissidents, who assert that Hakeem has abused his power, claim that they removed Hakeem as leader on December 1 per proper SLMC procedure.) Aside from the legal case against him, Hakeem is also being challenged politically: As reviewed in Reftels, he is under attack in the press by his rivals virtually every day. In addition, we have been told by contacts that party dissidents are trying to rally the populace against Hakeem in Muslim areas in the Eastern Province. (Note: Hakeem has also been touring the east trying to garner support.)

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A Lightweight Politician
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4. (C) It is not clear that Hakeem is up to the challenge he is facing. Most contacts agree that Hakeem is polite, thoughtful, and intelligent. In Colombo circles, the mild-mannered Hakeem is also respected for his support of the peace process. (Note: His main SLMC opponent, MP A.L.M. Athaulla, is basically against the GSL's peace initiative -- see below.) That said, Hakeem's recent problems have solidified his reputation as being essentially a lightweight politician, lacking the leadership skills required to succeed in the rough-and-tumble world of Sri Lankan politics.

5. (C) In respect to leadership skills, Hakeem has also been compared unfavorably to the founder of the party, M.H.M. Ashraff, who died in a helicopter crash in October 2000. (Note: Hakeem assumed control of the party in early 2001, after winning a fierce leadership battle.) Ashraff was seen as a strong, charismatic leader, who could reach out to the common man. Hakeem, however, is widely seen as somewhat aloof and lacking in energy. (Note: In meetings with Mission officers, he sometimes appears listless.) This lack of political verve and ability to articulate his views to the party faithful, coupled with his apparent inability to cut political deals, has left many observers wondering whether Hakeem has the tools to survive as SLMC leader.

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The Eastern Problem

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16. (C) The fact that Hakeem is not from the east where a plurality of Sri Lankan Muslims live is also coming into clearer focus as a serious liability. (Note: Hakeem, 42, is from central Sri Lanka, but has spent much of his life in Colombo. Up to 40 percent of Sri Lanka's Muslims live in the Eastern Province.) With the peace process focusing inexorably on possible GSL-Tamil Tiger power-sharing arrangements, the multi-ethnic east is correctly considered the thorniest issue needing settlement. Many eastern Muslims simply do not trust Hakeem to negotiate for them, seeing him as too willing to compromise with the government and the Tigers. Indeed, Hakeem's pro-peace process views are generally at odds with those held by many eastern Muslims, who are deeply skeptical of Tamil Tiger intentions.

17. (C) In addition, Hakeem's personal characteristics --as touched on above--are off-putting to many easterners, who find him too urbane and totally unlike the roughhewn, "man-of-the-people" politicians they are used to dealing with. (Note: Hakeem, a natty dresser, is wealthy and was educated in Sri Lanka's best schools. Muslims in the east, however, are generally poorer than their co-religionists elsewhere in Sri Lanka. Many of them are farmers and fishermen.) Again, Hakeem's failings raise the specter of Ashraff, who was from the east, and was extremely popular with Muslims in that region.

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COMMENT

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18. (C) With his political survival at stake, Hakeem has to make a comeback soon or face probable marginalization. Thus far, the odds do not look good, although Hakeem has been in some tight spots before and gotten out of them. (Note: There remains the possibility that the two sides may work out some sort of settlement. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has weighed in, urging compromise.) Another factor hurting Hakeem is the emerging view that it might not be bad for the peace process if he is cut out of the scene. While this perspective is a bit ironic given Hakeem's pro-peace process stance, Hakeem is probably not the *deus ex machina* needed to bring eastern Muslims on board with the peace process. The problem is finding someone who can play that role -- and it is not clear anyone in the Muslim community can. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

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